

Sturm Clusters

By John Farrell

Art by Cortney Skinner

I think he's disintegrating." Sturm frowned at the word but Flannery had a habit of choosing metaphysical terms that Sturm thought inappropriate — especially for a clinician — and he said so.

"Do you want to see him or not?" said Flannery.

Sturm let the phone slide onto his shoulder as he looked out his office window, admiring the contrast of the blue sky with the green pine trees along the boulevard. Finally he said, "Thanks, Jack, I'll see him."

"Good. I'm just glad I could catch you Not on the road these days?"

"Nope. I'll be in most of the day." Sturm picked up a pen and began to draw borders on the card in his Rolodex that said Pickering, Marylou. "Tell me more about this guy."

"He's a physicist, works as a consultant at Brownlow. Came in to see me a few times, complaining about his dreams."

"Uhuh."

"They're pretty abstract, and you've got more background in hard science than I do."

Sturm smiled. "That's cute, Jack. What's his problem? Substance abuse?"

Flannery laughed. "I said physicist, not pharmacist. He got his Ph.D. from Princeton. I thought of you because I can't help the guy and I don't want to kiss him off with Assured Health Associates."

"Okay, I'll see him. Give him my number — this afternoon — if it's that urgent to him."

"I think it is. He's a bit over-serious, but I'll let you be the judge."

"Thanks. Get a release of information. Peggy will give you the fax number. What's his name?"

"James Cullovey."

Cullovey stopped when he found the stream nearing the timber line. The tall birches had disappeared; only stubby fir trees surrounded him, and he sat on a stone where the water puddled.

He had no idea how long he'd been climbing. Through the treetops the sky looked dark, a rich cerulean blue he'd never before seen at this time of day. He glimpsed a star between the swaying branches overhead.

He scooped some water in the palm of his hand. It didn't feel cold or warm; tasteless too, as he swallowed some. He slid off the stone and continued his climb.

Despite the blue sky he soon noticed more stars, an unusual patch in particular. But for the obscur-

ing sunlight in the west (was it west?), it looked like a globular cluster.

He sat down again, fascinated, and tried to concentrate on the glowing orb until he woke.

That's it?"

James Cullovey nodded and took another sip of his water. "Yes."

"This is recurring now?"

Cullovey shifted, not a heavy man, but he didn't exercise and slouched in his chair. His hair thinned above the forehead and he had dirt under his fingernails; an unconscious observation as far as Sturm was concerned, but he hated to think what the guy's bathroom looked like. "No, it's not recurring, not really. I mean, I seem to get a little farther every night."

Sturm looked at his notes. "You were married once?"

Cullovey smiled, "My girlfriend just left me. But I was married until five years ago."

"For how long?"

"Nine years — and before you ask me — no I didn't leave my wife for Eleanor. I met her two years after my divorce. We lived together for a year."

Sturm nodded patiently, but put a hand over his mouth to conceal his grin, thinking she probably left because of the goddamned bathroom. What he said was, "Have you been feeling anxiety since she left?"

"Women don't make me anxious, Dr. Sturm."

Sturm put his pen down. "Why do these dreams bother you?"

Cullovey looked at the wall. "They bother me because I've never been a dreamer until now. And I've never had dreams of this clarity."

"How so?"

"I remember things. The rocks, the trees, and the water. It's very complete. You know, a dream isn't usually like that. These dreams are very continuous, if that's the right word."

Sturm nodded. "Reality consistent."

"Yes, and that's odd."

"Perhaps. What adjustments have you gone through since Eleanor left? How has your life changed?"

Cullovey looked into his cup of water. "It hasn't much. I've just gotten older. What are you thinking?"

"It's possible recent changes in your life at home or at work have affected you so your sleeping pat-

tern is changing."

"Well ..."

"It doesn't necessarily mean there's something wrong. You may be seeing what your dreams will be like for the near future. Has it affected your work at Brownlow?"

"No more than anything else."

Sturm shuffled his notes on the desk. "Mr. Cullovey, I'd like you to come in again."

Cullovey seemed nonplused for a moment. "Oh sure. Is our time up already?"

Sturm got up from his desk. "Only for today. I need a few more details, and at the risk of being an annoyance, I'd like you to take a pocket tape recorder, and start retelling your dreams as soon as you wake up."

Cullovey rose and placed his half-empty cup on the bookcase. "Ah. I don't have them every night."

"I realize that. Whatever you dream, whether it's related to this recurring sequence or not, I want you to describe for me."

"All right."

"Can you come in next Monday afternoon?"

Cullovey nodded. "I can come at four."

"Good. Any other files you might have, medical or work-related, would be helpful."

Cullovey shrugged, and put his hands in his pockets.

Sturm took him to the door, and as he held it open said, "There's just one more thing, Mr. Cullovey. Are you a physicist, or an astronomer?"

"I'm a physicist. I worked in theory, but for a while I was thinking about astrophysics."

"Where did you work before Brownlow?"

Cullovey seemed to hesitate for just a moment. "I was a researcher at Kendrick University in Springfield. It didn't pay very much though. Why do you ask?"

"It's no surprise you should notice something like a globular cluster, is it?"

Cullovey looked at Sturm closely. "It's not a surprise at all. In fact, I recognized it at once."

Sturm said, "You recognized what?"

"The cluster. It was NGC 6624."

Marylou arrived that evening as Sturm sat by his bed, drinking a glass of wine and flipping through pages of his college astronomy texts.

"You're not going back to school again, are you?" With a graceful swing of her leg, she closed the door behind her and put her briefcase on the dining room table. Sturm had known her for six months and he had yet to see her twice in the same outfit. She was wearing a red blazer over her navy blue skirt and blouse.

"No. Just getting reacquainted with some college stuff, although I suppose it's outdated now."

Marylou pushed the hair out of her eyes, and took a deep breath. "Let's have a drink already."

"Are you planning to stay the night?"

She stopped short with one of Sturm's favorite expressions. Whenever Marylou was surprised by something, she instinctively drew herself up to full height, almost six feet, with shoulders back as though a drill sergeant had yelled at her. She pursed her lips and smiled at him. "Uh-oh. I was but —"

Sturm closed his textbook, and climbed out of the lounge. "I didn't mean to give you the impression you were unexpected. Sit down and let me make you something."

She watched him go to the refrigerator. "What happened today?" she said quietly.

"New client. Is this salad day?"

She didn't say anything until he finished loading his arms with lettuce, half an onion, the leeks and carrot shavings, and shouldered the door closed. Then she kissed him. "Yes, this is salad day. Tell me."

Sturm moved carefully to the counter. "Mr. Cullovey has dreams that bother him, and they're interesting because — if he's being accurate, and I have no reason to doubt it — they're uniquely linear."

"What does that mean? All you've got is Thousand Islands."

"Thousand is fine." Sturm turned to the cupboard for the salad bowls. "It means they're not strictly recurring, or discontinuous like most dreams. From what he's told me so far, his dreams are recurring in only one respect: they're in the same location. That in itself is remarkable. But his observations, for instance of the stars, are completely literal. He's not drawing any obvious analogies, either sexual or familial."

Marylou watched him roll up his sleeves and wash his hands like a surgeon before he did anything to the vegetables. She took off her jacket, draped it over the kitchen chair, and looked at one of the books.

She said, "What's N.G.C. stand for?"

"New General Catalogue. The so-called new list of stars and galaxies that Dreyer charted in the eighteen eighties. Up to that time, astronomers operated on a list put together by a Frenchman named Messier."

She grinned. "Any relation to the Rangers' forward?"

He looked over his shoulder at her, his face a blank. Marylou started to laugh, and Sturm's neatly trimmed beard began to stretch as he smiled back.

"Is this about ice hockey again?"

"No, it's about stars. Your stars. Not mine. I'm from Canada."

Sturm finished making the salad and as they ate dinner, he told her about the cluster that Cullovey saw in his dream, all the while realizing something else he had to think about for the first time in his life: how and when to ask Marylou to marry him.

She followed him. Cullovey couldn't remember how long he'd watched the sky. The hills descended from him in all directions, the tiny treetops running all the way to the horizon where the clouds fought to obscure the coming light.

He remembered the night before, and tried to find the star cluster again. Though the sky seemed darker, he couldn't see as many stars. How odd, he thought to himself. There should have been more stars in a darker sky.

She said it was a different place.

What do you mean, he wanted to say, but he held his tongue because she seemed to know what he was thinking.

She said they were sitting on a planet near the Crab Pulsar that went nova in 1054. Some Indians had seen the explosion from Central America, and some Chinese astrologers on the other side of the world (who were promptly executed for failing to predict its occurrence).

I already knew that, Cullovey thought and wondered how they could breath air on this placid world, as if what she said could be true. It seemed difficult to explain why any planet in the neighborhood of a neutron star should not look like a cinder, but she didn't look like she cared to explain much of it anyway. So he asked the woman who she was, and how she knew where they were.

She felt warm now, and close beside him. At first he thought it was his former wife, but her hair never looked so dark.

"Oh, I'm not her," she said suddenly, and the clearness of her voice startled him.

A sharp wind seemed to rise even as his own voice rose within his mind. He looked at the clouds over the far horizon, and said he'd never seen the sunrise on a mountaintop.

She started to laugh, and said it wasn't a sunrise at all. "And those aren't clouds over the horizon. There are no clouds on this planet, not the kind you're thinking of."

With great effort, Cullovey sat up. Peering closely at the lower sky, he realized she was right. The sun would not rise. What shape had already risen, as long as he'd been watching, assumed the wide disk of an elliptical galaxy, its huge spiral arms which he'd mistaken for clouds, reaching from one end of the horizon to the other.

The woman continued to laugh, though she wouldn't let him see her face.

"What happened to 6624?" he said. "I saw it here last night."

She stopped laughing long enough to say, "We're in it."

After vainly trying to make out the details on her shadowed face, he tried to sound authoritative. "This is Sagittarius? You said we were in the Crab."

"This crab, that crab, what difference does it

make?" Her laughing didn't stop.

He looked up and noticed another star cluster coming into view. "But the Crab's in Taurus. We must be outside the galaxy altogether, millions of light years away."

She relaxed finally. "What a charge you are," she said. "What a charge."

Cullovey sat up in bed at 3:14 am. He took off his drenched T-shirt and went to the bathroom for a glass of water. It tasted unpleasantly warm, and when he opened the refrigerator, he found nothing but beer and iced tea.

He pulled on his slacks, a sweater, and his jacket, stepped into a pair of loafers, and went out to his car. He saw no stars above, only a vague grayness tinged with the yellow light from the city.

Cullovey drove down Hobart Street, and pulled into the parking lot of the Super Stop & Shop. Already he could see two clerks at the last registers still open, eleven and twelve. He picked up some Ocean Spray Cranberry Juice, and went to the woman running the cash register at twelve. He had seen her before on some of his stops and found her attractive. She looked slight, with a short haircut, maybe twenty years old. Cullovey found her breasts distracting under a pink knit sweater. Her hands felt warm as she returned his change. But she didn't notice his attention, nor did she return his smile. She looked bored.

When Cullovey got in the door he remembered the tape recorder. He drew the quart of juice from the grocery bag, went into the bedroom and sat by the desk as he recounted his dream. Then he drank half the container and fell back on his bed.

Sturm didn't hear from Cullovey for two weeks. Although curious, he did not make contact with clients who failed to call after a single visit. Sturm would only call someone if they'd been to see him at least two or three times.

He thought of breaking this rule; however, Cullovey called and set up another appointment.

They walked around the office park and Cullovey sat at a bench on the hill overlooking Route 128.

"I've had four dreams since I saw you last. Here's the tape. In each dream I was on an empty world, looking up at skies of varying brilliance. But it doesn't seem possible, does it?"

"Why do you say that?"

"There are trees, but no birds. Grass, but no bugs. It was all beautiful, but too familiar, and empty — like a museum display. I couldn't recognize any constellations. Out of the immediate galaxy, obviously, they would be different."

Sturm smiled. "Well, it's not exactly obvious to me, but thanks for assuming I know more than I

actually do."

"Look, the thing is, I watched for a long time, and I did finally spot something familiar. M-31, the Andromeda Galaxy. It was closer in my dreams than it actually looks from the best telescopes we have. But there's nothing between us and Andromeda. Just void."

He paused for so long, Sturm started to shut off his own tape recorder. "What's bothering me now is, I'm being followed."

"By whom?"

Cullovey shrugged. "I can't see her clearly. That's what drives me up the wall. Everything is so clear in these dreams, but the girl, this woman, is like a wraith."

Sturm said, "What do you feel toward her?"

Cullovey frowned, as though the question surprised him. "Oh, curiosity."

"No sexual attraction?"

"Well, yes, a strong one. I think I wanted to rape her."

"Why is that?"

Cullovey smiled now, but not enough to show any teeth. "I usually feel like that about the women in my dreams."

Sturm nodded slowly, displaying none of his growing concern, although he didn't like that smile.

"Mr. Cullovey," he began.

"Now look, I realize we can go off on that tangent, but I want to complete my thoughts first about these environments. They're all the same, just like here, like Earth. It's ridiculous."

Sturm folded his hands together. "I'd think so, too. Assuming random evolution is true, there's no reason to think other worlds would be even remotely like our own."

Cullovey rubbed his unshaven face. "Fewer and fewer physicists assume that evolution was ever truly random. That's what makes these dreams more ironic."

"I wasn't aware of that. But even so, what else does the human imagination have to go on? None of us has been to another star, another planet. All the ones nearby are cold dark stones. Naturally, if you try to envision another world, it will appear to be like ours."

Cullovey fell silent. "I know," he said at last. "That's when I know I'm dreaming. But when I look at the stars in my dreams, the clusters, they're all right where they would be if I were watching them from that place out there. You see what I'm saying? The clarity of the locale plays both ways. How can I doubt these dreams when I actually have an idea of where I am?"

"That's true, but the woman following you —"

Cullovey's eyes narrowed in anger. "I've been thinking of that too," he said. "What if it's not a woman? What if it just seems that way because they don't want me to know what they look like?"

Sturm had enough experience never to ask dumb questions of his patients, especially when he was recording his sessions. Instead of saying, who are they, he said, "Specify."

Cullovey sighed. "What if these aren't dreams at all, but messages ... sent from out there?"

Marylou's curiosity irritated him. Sturm took her to dinner at the Four Seasons after work, and they sat by the window overlooking Providence Street. After his session with Cullovey, the last thing he wanted to talk about was a client, and Marylou's persistent questions were blocking his concentration.

"It changes the whole picture then," she said as the waiter took their menus and ordered the wine steward to pour the sauvignon blanc.

Sturm smirked. "It just means he's more preoccupied with women than with stars. And it's too bad. The stars I found interesting. He's clearly suffering some mental fatigue —"

"What will you do? Prescribe something?"

Sturm gave her a wearied look.

Marylou smiled. "I'm a social worker. I can't prescribe anything. I'm jealous."

"Well, there's not much point, seeing as he has no trouble getting to sleep. Pills won't control what you dream."

"That's not true. If you give him something strong, you could knock him out."

Sturm nodded. "And make him virtually unfit for work. At least in his present condition he's still functional. But as I was saying, there's more than fatigue here. I called Brownlow and discovered that Mr. Cullovey has had some personal problems — with women."

"How did you find that out?"

"I pretended there was some information missing from his file, which turned out to be true. I had a feeling he had left something out when the stuff first came over for his first visit. So I called. It didn't take much prodding, and as usual, personnel directors let on more than they think, especially if you catch them right after lunch."

Marylou grinned and shook her head.

"I'd also like to know what problems he might have had at Kendrick University, his previous position. But that information will take much more than a phone call. I want to see where his dreams keep going in the meantime."

"Where do you think they'll go?"

Sturm spread his napkin carefully over his lap. "Eventually to a question mark. He can't keep deceiving himself that he's actually seeing reality. He's already become stressed to the point of believing they may be messages from outer space. Sooner or later he'll reach a limit."

"Could that take a long time?"

He smiled. "It's possible. He's certainly shown a

remarkable capacity for detail, even though the dreams are told from memory into a tape recorder. Those tapes alone suggest his subconscious could have enormous resources for his imaginative wanderings. The one he gave me today is a good example. In fact, I was thinking about it on the way over here."

"Oh." She said this with exaggerated disappointment, and smiled appreciatively when he sighed.

"As I was saying, he remembers most details quite vividly. For instance, the conversations with this mysterious woman who follows him about — haunts him more like — and laughs at his attempts to discover her identity, saying, quote: what a charge you are, what a charge."

Marylou shrugged. "I guess she gets a charge out of him."

"That's what I thought, but when I pressed him on the words, he insisted they were exactly as he said. And that indicates a preoccupation with detail, if nothing else."

"Then you can expect his dreams to get more detailed, I should imagine."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I think sooner or later he'll reach the limits of his imagination, conscious or unconscious, no matter how big the universe is."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then I'm going to win a Nobel Prize."

"Don't say that."

Sturm looked up from his lap and raised his eyebrows. "I just meant the case is curious. It's the kind of thing that could draw a lot of attention."

Marylou was starting to smile now. "I hope it doesn't. You'll become famous and move away."

"What if I did?" he said abruptly.

Now Marylou looked at her lap, and again she stiffened her shoulders and folded her hands over the table. "Would we still be friends?"

"Friends?"

She looked away at one of the waiters. "If you got an offer, like that one at Stanford — something that took you out to the west coast or down south — would we still be friends?"

He shook his head slowly. "If you and I were married, we would always be friends."

Marylou held his gaze, a slight parting of her lips the only sign his statement had taken her by surprise. "I thought you never wanted to get married." Her voice cracked over the last word.

Sturm reached into his pocket for the ring that had belonged to his mother, assuming even more of a clinical demeanor. "I never said that, Marylou. You were the one who said it, and I kept silent. You never pressed me on it." He put the small box on the table before her. "I've wanted to marry you since that night at the Hynes. Remember Greeley grabbed us for his survey on the effects of gender in highway traffic patterns? The question is whether you want to marry me."

"Yes," she said. When she held the ring up, a small diamond set in its center sparkled. She slipped the ring on her finger and closed the palm of her right hand, as though it were a secret. She reached across the table and took his hand, a smile on her face prompting his own.

"You know," she said. "These planet stories gave me an idea."

"I beg your pardon?"

"A way of testing his theory."

Sturm frowned. "Whose theory?"

"Culloy's. You said he thinks his dreams are coming from outer space."

Sturm glanced at an elderly couple being seated at the table nearby. "Marylou, this case, like all my others, is confidential. The only reason I tell you is because we're close. But for God's sake, I don't want you to get involved."

"I'm just saying there's a way to test his theory."

He started to say absolutely not. But the way she cocked her head and peered at him out of the corner of her eyes told him she was serious.

"All right, what is it?" he said.

"Monitor his dreams."

Sturm sat back. "Come on. I've done that for more reason and gotten little information."

She said, "I'm not talking about an electroencephalogram. I'm talking about something more detailed. My brother-in-law has been testing a new portable P.E.T. scanner. You could take it right to Culloy's bedroom. No lab. No disorientation. Pump him with fluorine-18, and you record the brain activity during his dreams."

Sturm gaped. "Marylou, are you out of your mind? I've got to have a medical reason — and even then I'd have trouble getting clearance."

"Who says you don't have a medical reason? You said his dreams were unique."

"Yes, and they're still dreams, not seizures. General Electric didn't produce positron emission tomography for the local video dealer."

"So why are they coming out with a portable version?"

Sturm held his breath for five seconds. Sometimes he just couldn't handle the woman.

Marylou smiled. "Darling, my brother-in-law's testing it. He's a qualified engineer, fifteen years working for G.E. I wouldn't suggest it if he didn't let me know. Timothy's always asking me for guinea pigs. Ask Culloy to sign a waiver. I bet you he'll do it."

"P.E.T. Jesus, we'd light up his brain like a chandelier."

"If his dreams are truly different, you'll see it."

"Well, why stop there? Why not drag him into Mass General and subject him to a fast M.R.I.? They can take an image per second."

"You can't bring him into a clinical setting and expect reliable results. He'll only dream when he's

at home. That's why I suggested the portable."

Sturm sat back and took another sip of his wine. "I came here to ask you to marry me. Now I've got to ask a depressed client if I can pump him full of radioactive fluorine-18 and make a recording of his brain while he sleeps. What does Cullovey get out of this?"

Marylou held up her glass to toast, the ring on her finger clinking against it. "Tell him he can keep the video."

Sturm sat with Cullovey in his living room, watching him swallow a glass of wine and listening to Timothy Denton, G.E. field engineer, pacing about the bedroom upstairs in his heavy L.L. Bean mountain boots as he prepared the scanner.

"I'll stay here," Sturm said to Cullovey. "Denton is five minutes away if there's any problem. But I wouldn't worry about it. I'm familiar with the clinical version of the P.E.T. This will be painless."

"Can you read the scanner, or do I have to pay for another doctor?" Cullovey poured himself another glass.

Sturm nodded. "I can read it. I'm anticipating sleep spindles, but we should also see other areas of concentration."

Cullovey smiled ruefully. "You mean if I'm making it all up."

"In effect, if your unconscious is making it up."

"I didn't realize the unconscious actually had a neurophysical signature. I just thought it was a metaphor for things psychologists groped at."

Sturm smiled. "I'm a doctor as well as a psychologist, Mr. Cullovey. Metaphors can be extremely apt. Even Freud had a good one for the unconscious." He took the glass away from his patient. "That's enough."

Cullovey looked morose. "I never slept with my mother, Doctor Sturm. I never even wanted to. She died when I was two."

Cullovey went to sleep an hour later. Sturm sat in an armchair in the living room, and could hear his patient's steady breathing as he fell into deeper sleep. The scanner hummed quietly by the bedside. Denton had connected it to a Macintosh Quadra outside in the hall but Sturm felt no desire to watch for the next few hours. Cullovey wouldn't be deeply into his dreams until well after midnight.

At 3:14 Sturm started from a doze. Cullovey called from his bedroom and Sturm stumbled up the stairs to prevent him from knocking over the equipment.

Cullovey had wrestled his way into the closet, the black brace and electrodes still fastened to his head.

"What happened?" said Sturm.

"I know where she's from. Get out of the way. I'll be right back."

"Cullovey, snap out of it. You're still wearing the brace —"

Cullovey pressed one of his heavy hands against Sturm's chest and the psychiatrist fell over, caught by surprise. Cullovey tore the brace off, and dropped it on the bed. He grabbed some loafers along with a jacket and charged down the stairs with "I'll be right back!" trailing behind him. His foot caught the five-pin cable and wrenched the computer off its small table.

Sturm leaped to grab it before it slid down the stairs.

He got to his car in time enough to follow Cullovey's blue Berlinetta down Hobart Street. He swerved left into the parking lot of the Stop & Shop.

When Sturm ran through the front doors Cullovey was already accosting the girl at check-out number twelve. She shrank against the cash register screaming, as two of the stewards leaped on Cullovey's back and a patron ran outside to shout for the police.

"It's all right, I just want to ask her some questions. I saw her. I saw her before!"

"Relax, buddy. Leave her alone!"

Sturm intercepted the policemen as they charged in through the exit doors. "Officer, it's not a robbery. He's a patient of mine, he's suffering trauma —"

"Just step aside, sir."

The stewards had pulled Cullovey to the floor and Sturm approached the girl by the register. She spat out a wad of chewing gum she'd almost swallowed when Cullovey grabbed her.

"Jesus, I thought he was going to rape me on the spot."

"I saw her, Doctor Sturm! She was the one I saw from the nebula, the one who was hiding from me all this time."

The cops looked at Sturm and he shook his head. "It's mistaken identity. She looks like someone he knows —"

"Where are you from?" said Cullovey, still struggling.

"I'm not telling you," she said nervously. "Bad enough my boyfriend's a creep without this guy showing up."

Sturm brought Cullovey back to his house before daylight. He felt raw and irritated. "Nice performance, Cullovey. The cops think you're a nut. I want to know what you're hiding."

"I'm not hiding anything."

"You knocked me over and damaged some expensive equipment, which is going to be hard to explain since there was never any point in using it — obviously."

"That's not true. I haven't been lying."

"I said hiding," Sturm snapped. "The failed marriage and former girlfriend were a sign, but I mean these incidents with co-workers you left out of your

files."

Cullovoy caught his breath.

"Those women and now this one. These dreams are more than you've made out."

He said, "Where's my car?"

"Your car will be fine. Tell me."

Cullovoy wrapped his jacket more tightly around his waist. "All right." He placed his hands on the dashboard for several moments while he collected his thoughts. "I told you I was a researcher at Kendrick. I was. Me and two others, working on a project in solid state. There was some grant money to be had, and we faked our results. They faked them. I went along with it, and a woman I was seeing outside the department blew the whistle on us. The hard part was, I was the one they fired. The other two weren't dismissed."

Sturm nodded. "You mean their credentials were more impressive, in spite of their offense."

Cullovoy stiffened. "Yeah. I always felt I was the bottom end of the mean. And the dreams ... when they started, seemed like my aspirations coming back to haunt me. Me and my mediocrity. I guess you could say that's what the dreams partly mean." He turned his flat face toward Sturm. "What I want to know is, when will they stop?"

Sturm went home and slept until noon. He answered the phone and sat up when he heard Timothy Denton's raspy voice.

"Did you check the images?"

"Cripes, no," said Sturm. "He was out the door so fast. I thought you were going to put them on video for me."

"I have. I didn't say anything to Cullovoy, I just scarfed up the equipment like you said, and took off. Come on downtown, you should look at these. You were right about the sleep spindles. But there was a great deal of concentration in his frontal lobe — which you'd expect from deep dreaming. He was concentrating real hard."

"So?"

"So? There were no signs of neural inhibition in the brain stem."

"Say that again."

"You heard me. When you go to sleep at night, your brain stem sends out little signals that tell your muscles to relax, basically so they won't respond to your dreams and have you walk out the window or something."

"Okay."

"So, Cullovoy's brain didn't do that. But you're a doctor, I want you to look at this scan and tell me I'm reading it right. I've never been wrong before."

Sturm rubbed his eyes. "No neural inhibition at all?"

"None. And that doesn't jibe with the activity in his frontal lobe. The guy was dreaming up a storm. He was watching something intently. No REMs. But

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the lack of neural inhibition would indicate he wasn't even asleep, like he was getting the message from outside."

Sturm climbed out of bed. "Outside? Get over here with that tape, Denton. I'll call Cullovoy."

He hung up the phone, started to get dressed and then stopped himself. Sturm returned to the phone and dialed his fiancée's number at work.

"Marylou?" he said. "Oh, Marylou? Guess what? We can't let Cullovoy keep the video."

The receptionist at Brownlow said Cullovoy had called in sick. But when Sturm phoned his house, there was no answer.

He drove straight to the little Victorian in Wollaston. Cullovoy's Berlinetta had been returned to the driveway. The front door was locked, and when Sturm got no answer to his repeating ringing and knocking on the door, he slipped out back and managed to force a screen on the porch.

The house was empty. Sturm knew it as soon as he climbed down from the pantry. He passed through the kitchen, climbed the stairs slowly, and as he approached Cullovoy's room caught the clicking sound of a tape recorder shutting off.

Cullovoy wasn't in the room. The small pocket recorder lay on the floor amidst his blankets. Sturm picked it up. The tape had run out and he had to rewind almost an hour's worth before he found Cullovoy's voice:

"I think Sturm is probably through with me. I can't say I blame him ... funny, in all the commotion I forgot to tell him what she said to me last night, just before I woke up. She said I was almost ready ..."

His voice ended there, and so did Sturm's case. Cullovoy never came back.

A month later Sturm woke in a cold sweat, fumbling through his books as he switched on the night light and grasped his little Webster's pocket dictionary to confirm a definition of the word charge: "a person entrusted to one's care or management." He'd always known that, but this night the words of a stranger he'd never met echoed in his mind again: "What a charge you are. What a charge." □